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Texas Baptist National World

Ministry seeks to transform remote African villages.

Reprint from Baptist Standard, February 1, 2024

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An international ministry with Texas Baptist roots is seeking to transform remote villages in Uganda and Tanzania by providing access to education, clean drinking water and the gospel.

Since its founding more than five decades ago, Amigos Internacionales has served vulnerable children and families in more than 20 countries, particularly providing food and emergency aid.

"About seven years ago, we made the decision to go from being a reactive ministry to being more of a proactive ministry," Executive Director Michael Ryer said.

The Texas-based nonprofit organization began a child-sponsorship program to allow donors to supply essential needs for children in Uganda.

Figure 1 1Michael Ryer, executive director of Amigos Internacionales, inspects a well the missions organization drilled in an African village. Providing wells is part of the organization's Missionpoint strategy for planting churches and transforming communities.

Through those contacts, God opened up the opportunity for Amigos Internacionales to multiply its impact by purchasing a school building and 10 adjoining acres in Ogul Village in the Gulu District of northern Uganda, Ryer said.

'Village within a village'

Amigos Internacionales views the Ogul Village Restoration Project campus—a school, church, water well and demonstration farm—as a "village within a village."

Today, 166 children attend Open Hands Academy in an area once terrorized by Joseph Kony, the militant warlord accused of abducting tens of thousands of children to become sex slaves and child soldiers in his Lord's Resistance Army. Last year, the academy completed an expansion project to increase its capacity, allowing for a student population of up to 245 pupils.

Figure 2 Children enjoying fresh water from water well drilled by Amigos.

In that troubled region and among its traumatized people, Amigos Internacionales offers "a sanctuary of peace and tranquility," Ryer said.

Each Sunday, more than 200 people worship at Agape Baptist Church. In three years, the church has baptized more than 400 new Christians.

The farm is producing rice, beans, cassava and corn, and Amigos Internacionales is establishing breeding

programs for goats, rabbits and poultry. Fast-growing eucalyptus trees cover three acres, providing essential building material for the villagers' grass hut roofs and a potential future source of commercial eucalyptus oil.

Missionpoint strategy expands reach

Figure 3 Newly formed Missionpoint church in Tanzania meeting under a tree.

Based on its success in Ogul Village and in response to needs in the region, Amigos Internacionales launched its Missionpoint strategy to expand into other villages—particularly in areas populated predominantly by Muslim refugees from South Sudan.

Local pastors and village leaders work with Amigos Internacionales personnel to identify needs and resources—particularly land that can be donated to "develop spiritual communities" in remote rural areas, Ryer explained.

Amigos Internacionales seeks to provide clean drinking water and Living Water to remote villages in Uganda and Tanzania. (Photo courtesy of Amigos Internacionales)

After the land is donated, Amigos Internacionales works with local officials to drill a water well and set a hand pump to provide clean water for villagers. At the same time, pastors from Lamwo Baptist Association churches in outlying areas help start Bible studies and hold outdoor worship services.

Once a church is established, Amigos Internacionales helps to build a school and begin life-skill classes for adults to enhance economic development in the village. The final step is to establish a demonstration farm—focusing first on producing food for local families and later to grow cash crops so the communities can become self-sustaining.

The Missionpoint strategy proved so effective in Uganda, Ryer noted, Christians in Tanzania wanted to work with Amigos Internacionales to plant churches and transform remote rural villages in the central part of their country.

"In Tanzania, we can't keep up," Ryer said.

Villagers worship outdoors until a church building can be constructed. (Photo Courtesy of Amigos Internacionales)

Christians in Uganda and Tanzania prompted Amigos Internacionales to set an ambitious "25 by 25" goal—to establish 25 new mission points by the end of 2025.

He noted Jacob Bonney, who became director of operations in Tanzania, and his team continue to identify additional villages that need a gospel witness and access to clean water and educational opportunities.

"Pastor Jacob already has four mission churches lined up," Ryer said. Bonney and his team hope to share the gospel with 3,000 people in Shinyanga Province this year.

Last year, Missionpoint churches in Uganda and Tanzania reported 1,159 professions of faith in Christ, and local leaders have committed to discipling each new believer, Ryer noted.

Figure 4 John LaNoue

'Followed God's nudging'

John LaNoue, longtime leader in Texas Baptist Men disaster relief ministries and one of the founders of Amigos Internacionales, marvels at how the ministries of Amigos Internacionales have expanded.

"It all began in 1967, building mobile medical clinics for River Ministry to use along the border," LaNoue said.

While serving on the TBM staff, LaNoue spent three months in North Korea in 1997 as a representative of Amigos Internacionales. He was part of a five-person team of representatives from nongovernmental organizations in the

United States, sent to monitor the distribution of food provided as famine relief by U.S. humanitarian organizations, including 130 tons supplied by Texas Baptists.

He sees the expanding work Amigos Internacionales is doing in Africa today as another example of responding to invitations from God.

"I didn't plan any of this. We just followed God's nudging," said LaNoue, who continues to serve on the Amigos Internacionales board of directors, along with Bill Arnold, retired founding president of the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation. "This is where God is working."

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